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## **Indifference and Alienation. Diverging Dimensions of Electoral Dealignment in Europe**

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### Abstract

Within the literature, there is an ongoing debate on how to understand the broader implications of the process of electoral dealignment. While some authors argue that dealignment leads to a more ‘open’ electorate that ponders the options offered by the party system, other authors have argued that dealignment leads to a general alienation from the party system. In this article, we investigate the relation between partisanship, indifference towards political parties, and alienation from the party system, based on an analysis of the voter surveys of the European Election Studies (EES) project, 1989-2014. The results indicate that dealignment is associated with indifference as well as with alienation but that the relation with alienation is much stronger, both on an aggregate as on an individual level. We conclude therefore that dealignment could pose a challenge for the legitimacy of the party system as a whole.

Keywords: political parties, dealignment, partisanship, indifference, alienation

## Introduction

The scholarly literature points at the occurrence of a process of electoral dealignment among electorates in advanced industrial democracies (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002; Dalton, 1984; Franklin *et al*, 2009; Särilvik and Crewe, 1983). This pattern of dealignment can be defined as a gradual weakening of the linkages and the affective ties between voters and political parties. There is quite some debate on the extent to which there is dealignment, and it is equally clear that trends vary substantially from one country to another (Bafumi and Shapiro, 2009; Franklin *et al*, 2009). Nevertheless, indications of change are manifold and accumulating, and even the most sanguine defenders of a thesis of stability and continuity in Western European politics have started to report evidence of flux in electoral behaviour in European democracies (Mair, 2002). In sum, it seems that a process of dealignment is indeed present and affecting voting behavior in advanced democracies. Indications are that voting has become more volatile, that split ticket voting has increased and that institutionalized political participation has declined (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002).

While there is mounting evidence substantiating the claim that dealignment is taking place, there is an ongoing debate about how exactly this process should be conceptualized, and what are its potential consequences. The point of departure is that traditionally ‘aligned’ electorates can be considered as closed for new competitors. If partisanship has a very strong effect, this implies that for most voters there is not all that much leeway to consider voting for other parties, as they are strongly attached to their initially preferred party. Within this context, new political parties face an uphill struggle if they want to acquire a market share in such a closed electorate. So while we know how an ‘aligned’ or closed electorate looks like, there are two options to understand the process of dealignment (Rose and McAllister, 1986). The first possibility is that the closed shop system has given way to truly open electoral competition, where an increasingly large part of the electorate is open to be persuaded by the

messages of new political parties and parties they did not support in previous elections. If we conceptualize dealignment as an opening up of traditionally solidly anchored electoral loyalties, there is no reason to assume that the electorate's attitude towards the party system as a whole would necessarily change: one preferred party can simply be exchanged for varying preferences from one election to another. According to a second theoretical perspective, however, dealignment implies an alienation of citizens from the entire party system. The fact that there no longer is a single preferred party, would imply that all that is left is a negative, depreciative attitude that extends towards all political parties. This distinction between closed, open and alienated electorates is powerfully evoked by Rose and McAllister (1986: 156): *"In a closed electorate, voters would only endorse positive remarks about their own party; in an open electorate they could find something good to say about more than one party. In an alienated electorate, nothing good would be said about any of the parties."*

It is quite striking to note, however, that there is not all that much empirical research investigating this distinction between closed, open and alienated electorates. While it seems clear that the bonds between voters and their most preferred party are becoming weaker, it does remain an open question whether this leads to an open, or rather to an alienated electorate. Apartisans were originally portrayed as politically uninvolved citizens (Campbell *et al*, 1960) and recent publications still show that independents and apartisans are less involved and interested in politics and have lower levels of political knowledge (Albright, 2009; Dassonneville *et al*, 2012). These findings suggest that dealignment in practice equals political alienation, since an increase in the number of independents in the electorate – as a result of dealignment – is thought to reflect increasing levels of political alienation. However, Dalton (1984, 2013) has argued that the new dealigned voter that enters the electorate represents the ancient ideal of an independent citizen, who weighs in an independent manner the pros and cons associated with the positions of every political party s/he could vote for.

The expectation within this line of the literature is that the growth in the number of apartisans in the electorate results in more ‘open’ electorates, with truly informed vote choices being cast on Election Day (Dalton, 2013).

The main ambition of this article is to develop a rigorous empirical test shedding light on the question whether dealignment is associated with the surge of either an open or an alienated electorate. An open electorate would imply that dealigned voters indeed have a realistic possibility to switch from one party to another, as their utility functions do not differ all that much between parties. An alienated electorate on the other hand would imply that when the strong propensity to vote for one preferred party is lost, the end result is a negative attitude towards all political parties. Investigating these different dimensions of electoral dealignment, with a focus on the distinction between openness and alienation, has important normative and theoretical consequences. An open electorate responds more closely to the classical democratic ideal, as this implies that citizens will consider the various options being offered by the party system. An alienated electorate, on the other hand, could be an indication for a lack of democratic legitimacy, which could have adverse consequences for democratic stability.

In the remainder of this article, we first explain more in detail why it is important to introduce a distinction between openness and alienation. Subsequently we operationalize both concepts, before we present data and methods. The next section gives an overview of the results and we end with some concluding thoughts on the implications of our findings.

### **Dealignment, alienation and indifference**

Over the past decades, voting behaviour in democracies in Western-Europe has altered fundamentally. The stable bonds between voters and parties have eroded through a process of dealignment, and this process as well as the changes in voting behaviour it instigates are by

now well documented (Walczak *et al*, 2012). This is evident from the fact that the proportion of citizens that feels strongly attached to a particular political party decreases (Clarke and Stewart, 1998; Crewe *et al*, 1977; Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002; Denver and Garnett, 2014; Dalton, 2013; Schmitt, 2009), from the observation that turnout and party membership figures are in decline (Franklin, 2004; Hooghe and Kern, 2015; van Biezen *et al*, 2012), from indications of an increase in split-ticket voting (Dalton, 2012), the waning of class voting (Evans and Tilley, 2012; Franklin *et al*, 2009) or an increase of levels of volatility (Dassonneville and Hooghe, forthcoming; Pedersen, 1979). Undeniably, linkages between voters and parties have weakened in recent decades, and we can no longer characterize electorates as ‘closed’ (Rose and McAllister, 1986).

A rather optimistic interpretation is that this process has led to an ‘opening’ up of electorates, allowing for the realization of a democratic ideal where voters carefully and independently consider alternative options instead of relying on habits, parental socialization or the social class they belong to when deciding what party to vote for (Dalton, 2013). Such an evolution is considered to positively affect representative democracy, as this ‘choosiness’ from the part of voters “*encourages politicians to pay more attention to the views of the electorate*” (Rose and McAllister, 1986: 162). Some empirical findings offer suggestive evidence for such a pattern, with apartisans making vote choices that appear ‘truly’ informed (Dalton, 2013). Walczak and her colleagues (2012), for example, show issues to be of more importance for younger and dealigned generations of voters when they decide what party to vote for and Jessee (2010) has shown that while partisans’ perceptions of the positions of candidates is biased, the vote choices of independent voters are in accordance with spatial voting theories. Furthermore, Kayser and Wlezien (2011) show that performance evaluations have a stronger impact on the vote of apartisans compared to what holds for voters with a partisan attachment. Tilley and Hobolt (2011) additionally present experimental evidence

showing that partisanship biases citizens' attribution of responsibility as well as their evaluation of government performance, while apartisans are not biased. Even though suggestive, these findings do not shed light on whether dealignment indeed implies that voters are taking into consideration multiple parties when casting their vote. Even if issue voting is on the rise, for example, an established pattern of issue ownership within the party system might still imply that in practice they only consider one party that is likely to receive their vote. It has to be tested, therefore, whether dealignment indeed leads to the outcome that the differences in the expected utility outcomes of different party preferences becomes smaller, implying that voters are taking into consideration multiple parties when casting a vote. This leads to the first hypothesis – H1 – that dealignment is associated with a growing openness towards the options being offered by various political parties, or to phrase it differently that they are more indifferent toward the utility functions offered by the different parties.

Other authors, however, are much more pessimistic about the possible implications of the process of dealignment. Coinciding with the process of dealignment, in a number of countries it has been shown that levels of political trust are declining (Dalton, 2004). Furthermore, cross-sectional studies have repeatedly shown that apartisans are less involved in politics and less satisfied with democracy (Albright, 2009; Dassonneville *et al*, 2012; Marthaler, 2008). Voters who switch parties from one election to another, too, have been characterized as 'frustrated' about and alienated from politics (Söderlund, 2008; Zelle, 1995). Following this line of thought, our second and competing hypothesis – H2 – would be that dealignment is associated with a growing alienation from political parties and the party system.

The difference between alienation and indifference as dimensions of dealignment largely coincides with the distinction Dalton (2012, 2013) has introduced between different types of apartisans. There is a growing consensus that an increasing proportion of the

electorate in Western-European democracies can be considered as ‘apartisan’, i.e., without a firm party identity. According to Dalton, one can distinguish two different types of apartisans: the cognitively mobilized on the one hand and the apolitical on the other. Cognitively mobilized apartisans are choosing political parties independently from partisan cues, but they are still politically involved and interested in politics. Their party preferences are hence indifferent, as they do not have a fixed preference, but in no way these citizens are alienated from the party system as a whole. We use the term indifferent here in its original meaning, i.e., a lack of differentiation in expected utilities, no matter how high or how low this level of expected utilities is. The apolitical independents, by contrast, are the ones not involved in party politics at all and they shun any form of electoral engagement. For this group, the prevailing attitude should be one of alienation, with none of the parties being regarded as an attractive option. While we know that the group of apartisans grows larger, we do not know whether this group should be predominantly considered as open to multiple options, or predominantly as alienated from the party system.

We argue that the best way to investigate this question is to rely on the concepts of indifference and alienation. These two concepts originate in a Downsian logic of party utilities. Spatial modelers refer to indifference and alienation as two distinct positions of voters vis-à-vis political parties (Anderson and Glomm, 1992; Johnston *et al*, 2007). First, indifference refers to a situation where “*voters perceive little (no) difference between alternatives*” (Aarts and Wessels, 2005: 78), implying that voters have the same or similar utilities to vote for multiple parties. Voters might still observe an ideological difference between a left or a right wing party, but if they do not have any preferences for either party, they are basically indifferent towards the available options. Scholars investigating the determinants of turnout argue that when utilities to vote for multiple parties are similar, citizens are less willing to pay the cost of turning out to vote (Aarts and Wessels, 2005;

Adams *et al*, 2006). Given (almost) equal preferences for multiple political parties these voters have no apparent incentive to turn out and vote.

Second, alienation denotes a setting in which “*both (all) alternatives in the election are far from the voter’s ideal point*” (Aarts and Wessels, 2005: 78). A sense of alienation arises when citizens feel that all parties or candidates are distant from them and previous research has shown that this feeling as well reduces citizens’ willingness to pay the cost of voting and therefore decreases turnout in elections (Aarts and Wessels, 2005; Adams *et al*, 2006).

Within the literature there is some discussion about how to operationalize both concepts. Indifference and alienation are traditionally conceived of in terms of the distance between citizens and parties on one or multiple issues. Additionally, a number of scholars have taken a broader perspective, treating indifference and alienation as aspects of citizens’ perceptions of the party system itself (Aarts and Wessels, 2005; Johnston *et al*, 2007). It is this latter approach that we follow in the current paper, by focusing on citizens’ attitudes towards the parties at offer expressed in their propensity to vote for a specific party. More specifically, we want to investigate to what extent being an apartisan induces indifference (i.e., little difference between the preferences for different parties) or rather alienation (i.e., a negative attitude towards the entire party system).

### **Data and methods**

For investigating the relation between electoral dealignment on the one hand, and indifference and alienation on the other we use two different analytical approaches. First, given that dealignment is considered a process that is developing over time, we investigate over-time trends in indifference and alienation and we assess descriptively the extent to which these trends co-occur with weakening partisan attachments. As we know dealignment is an



ongoing process, it is a sound strategy to investigate whether indifference or alienation follow the same development over time. If this is not the case, it is rendered unlikely that dealignment would be related to these phenomena. Second, we examine on a cross-sectional basis how both concepts relate to whether or not a citizen is attached to one particular political party, allowing us to assess to what extent apartisans are indifferent and/or alienated from the parties at offer. We make use of the voter survey data from the European Election Studies (EES) project. These data allow investigating indifference and alienation and how these two attitudes relate to dealignment for a broad set of West-European countries. It is in this context of the advanced democracies in Western Europe that the process of dealignment is argued to be at play most strongly (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002). Furthermore, using the combined EES dataset (1989-2004), supplemented with the voter surveys that were conducted during the 2009 and 2014 European Parliament elections, allows investigating changes in levels of indifference and alienation between 1989 and 2014. Self-evidently this combination of longitudinal and cross-sectional analyses does not address the question of causality, but it allows us to discount some relations. If we do not find any relation at all between on the one hand alienation or indifference, and electoral dealignment on the other, it is unlikely that there should be any causal relation.

We adopt the approach of Johnston *et al* (2007) for operationalizing indifference and alienation – conceived of as perceptions of the party system. The data sets that we analyse however, do not include ‘thermometer scales’, as in the original research by Johnston *et al*. Therefore, we rely on ‘propensity to vote’ (PTV)-measures, on a scale from 1 to 10, for each of the parties at offer.<sup>1</sup> These PTV-scales allow for sufficient variance in order to investigate our two hypotheses. PTV-scales are closely related to thermometer and like/dislike scales, but they are intended to directly measure electoral utilities (van der Eijk and Marsh, 2011). This characteristic of PTV-scales makes them well suited for operationalizing indifference and

alienation, and the idea of indifference and alienation as referred to by Rose and McAllister (1986) in particular, as those PTV-scales express the “*utility that voters might derive from the various choices*” (Johnston *et al*, 2007: 737). The wording of the PTV-question is: ‘We have a number of parties in [country] each of which would like to get your vote. How probable is it that you will ever vote for the following parties? Please specify your views on a 10-point-scale where 1 means ‘not probable at all’ and 10 means ‘very probable’.

Adopting the operationalization of Johnston *et al* (2007: 737) implies that indifference is a measure of “*how much the respondent prefers his or her favorite party over the least favorite one*”, which is expressed as follows:

$$\text{Indifference} = (10 - (\max(\text{PTV}_i) - \min(\text{PTV}_{j \neq i}))) / 10 \quad (1)$$

where  $\text{PTV}_i$  is the rating of the  $i^{\text{th}}$  party on the 10-point scale

Alienation, by contrast, is a measure of “*how far the respondent is from his or her closest party*” (Johnston *et al*, 2007: 737) and is expressed as:

$$\text{Alienation} = (10 - \max(\text{PTV}_i)) / 10 \quad (2)$$

where  $\text{PTV}_i$  is the rating of the  $i^{\text{th}}$  party on the 10-point scale

Party identity is measured by means of two questions in the EES-surveys. A first question asks voters whether or not they feel close to a particular political party. Subsequently, their degree of closeness is gauged for, the options ranging from ‘merely a sympathizer’, ‘fairly close’ to ‘very close’. To ease the interpretation of the results, we include a dichotomous variable (distinguishing partisans and apartisans) in the analyses, and

we consider voters who report being fairly or very close to a party as partisans.<sup>2</sup> As a limitation of the EES-data, it has to be mentioned that a change in the wording of these questions from 2004 onwards has led to an increase in the proportion of respondents mentioning being close to a particular party, preventing a longitudinal analysis of partisanship and its impact on alienation and indifference using the EES-data. We thus present an alternative approach to gain insights in changes in partisanship over time and rely on other data-sources to verify whether at an aggregate-level the trends in indifference and alienation that we observe are paralleled with a trends towards dealignment. To this end, we employ data from Eurobarometer; a data source scholars have previously relied on to examine the presence of a process of dealignment (Kayser and Wlezien, 2011; Lisi, 2015). As the Eurobarometer surveys no longer include a measure of partisanship after 1994, we append to the time series the data from the seven modules of the European Social Survey (ESS, 2002-2014). As a result, we can cover the period 1989-2014, although the series is interrupted between 1994 and 2002. Furthermore, as the wording of party ID questions changes within the Eurobarometer data (Schmitt, 1989) and between the Eurobarometer data and the ESS-data as well (Lisi, 2015), we have to be careful when assessing the trend in these data. As a cautious approach, we look at the proportion of respondents indicating that they feel close to a party, which is in line with how Lisi (2015) has investigated trends in partisanship by means of a combination of Eurobarometer and ESS-data.

While our focus is on the relation between indifference and alienation on partisanship, various control variables are called for in the individual-level analyses. We control for the impact of gender, age, religious practice and social class as well as political interest, as all of these background variables have been shown to be closely related to various forms of electoral behaviour and political attitudes.

The datasets used for the analyses cover a number of different countries and institutional settings, but our hypotheses are situated at the individual level, which is why we focus on trends and effects within countries.<sup>3</sup> For the explanatory analyses, we hence present the results of fixed effects models, allowing for a general assessment of individual-level effects while controlling for country-specific differences in levels of alienation and indifference.

## **Results**

### *Change over time*

In a first step, we examine the over-time evolution of attitudes of indifference and alienation in the electorates of Western Europe and we compare this to trends in partisanship over time. Importantly, as different data sources are used, the time points at which partisanship on the one hand and indifference and alienation on the other are measured differ. As a result, we cannot estimate correlations between aggregate-level figures. Instead, we graphically assess time trends and to ease the interpretation of these trends, we include linear trend lines for each of the time series. According to our hypotheses, we should graphically note opposing trends (with partisanship decreasing and indifference/alienation increasing).

We start by assessing levels of indifference, or the extent to which a voter prefers her/his favorite party over the least preferred party (Figure 1). Looking at the graphs, it is evident that there is quite some between-country variation in levels and trends of indifference and partisanship across Western Europe. Importantly, however, the graphs show that trends are in expected – opposite – directions for partisanship on the one hand and indifference on the other. We furthermore note the sharpest over-time increases in indifference in countries where partisanship has declined strongly as well (e.g., Greece or Italy). In Sweden, finally, which is the only country where levels of partisanship appear to be increasing, we observe a

trend towards decreasing levels of indifference. Clearly, the graphs suggest that dealignment and indifference are indeed correlated.

Focusing on trends in indifference, we furthermore observe that mean levels of indifference in the 2014 election are significantly higher than in the first election examined in 9 out of the 16 countries (see Appendix 1). Across the election samples, levels of indifference have increased from 0.26 in 1989 to 0.33 at the time of the 2014 European Parliament elections, suggesting that over the 25 years covered by our analyses, levels of indifference have increased by roughly one fourth.

[Figure 1 about here]

Next, we examine levels of alienation in the election samples covered. Alienation has been calculated using equation (2) and hence varies between 0 and 1 as well. Looking at the country-specific graphs plotting the evolution of alienation and partisanship in Figure 2, it can be observed that in countries where partisanship has decreased most strongly, we find alienation to increase most strongly as well. Portugal is a clear example of these opposing trends. Furthermore, in countries where partisanship remains largely stable we observe levels of alienation to be remain fairly stable over time as well (e.g., Finland). In line with what we observed for indifference, we furthermore note that in the only country where levels of partisanship are increasing (Sweden), levels of alienation are decreasing. In sum, this descriptive look at trends in partisanship and alienation confirms the intuition of a correlation between dealignment and alienation in Western Europe.

Looking at the trends in alienation more specifically, we find strong indications of an increase in alienation since 1989. There is some between-country variation in the extent to which levels of alienation increase, but overall, the main pattern is one of growing levels of

alienation – with levels of alienation being significantly higher in 2014 compared to 1989 in 12 out of 16 countries. Across the countries, levels of alienation almost doubled from 0.12 in 1989 to 0.19 in 2014 (see Appendix 2).

In sum, this descriptive analysis of trends in partisanship in Western Europe on the one hand and attitudes of indifference and alienation on the other suggests that dealignment is indeed associated with indifference and alienation. The graphs illustrate that the rise of alienation and indifference coincides with the decline of partisanship.

Having examined the levels of indifference and alienation in Western Europe, and their evolution more specifically, we find indications of European electorates becoming both more indifferent and more alienated over time.<sup>4</sup> The evidence is strongest for alienation, however, with a significant increase in a larger number of countries and additionally a more pronounced overall increase than what holds for indifference. Previous research has offered indications that in Western Europe, the linkages between voters and parties have eroded over time (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002; Kayser and Wlezien, 2011). Our analyses suggest that this process of dealignment is compatible with a trend towards more indifference as well as with a growing alienation from political parties – although evidence is most convincing for alienation.

[Figure 2 about here]

### *Explaining indifference and alienation*

The aggregate level findings thus far suggest that alienation from the party system has grown more rapidly in European political systems than indifference towards the available options within the party system. To supplement these aggregate findings with individual level analyses, we investigate further the relation with partisanship. More specifically, we want to

determine how dealignment at an individual level – which we operationalize as being an apartisan – is related to indifference on the one hand and alienation on the other. To this end, we rely on regression analyses and estimate the impact of having a partisan identification on indifference and alienation respectively.

Before doing so, however, it is insightful to examine to what extent indifference and alienation are independent political attitudes. Examining how both attitudes correlate indicates a pearson correlation of 0.890 ( $p < 0.000$ ). To a large extent, hence, citizens with indifferent party preferences are also alienated from the parties at offer. The implication of this strong correlation is that there are hardly any citizens considering multiple parties when casting a vote who are not – in general – feeling rather negative about all parties. In practice, therefore, indifference and alienation are closely related empirically. To a large extent, this high correlation is also a consequence of our operationalization of indifference and alienation. When a person is highly alienated, as apparent from a low maximum PTV-value, the difference between her/his most and least preferred party will inevitably be smaller as well. In order to assess the impact of partisanship on one attitude correctly, it is therefore crucial to control for the other attitude as well. Explaining indifference we therefore control for the impact of alienation, and explaining alienation we control for the impact of indifference.

Even though indifference and alienation are correlated, we also want to be sure that they capture conceptually different attitudes towards the party system. More specifically, we would expect alienation to reflect a deprecatory attitude towards the political system, but indifference not – as this attitude only means that citizens take different parties into consideration when casting a vote. The results of some additional analyses reported in Appendix 3 show that this is indeed the case, as both concepts are related differently to fundamental attitudes toward the political system. Higher levels of alienation are significantly related to lower levels of political trust and less satisfaction with democracy – two attitudes

that are regularly looked at for assessing democratic legitimacy. For indifference, by contrast, we do not find a significant relation with these political attitudes. We can thus be confident that our operationalizations of indifference and alienation do indeed capture different theoretical constructs. Alienation is associated with more negative attitudes towards the political system (as it is negatively associated with levels of trust in politics and the extent to which one is satisfied with democracy), while this is not the case for indifference.

Examining how partisanship relates to indifference and alienation, we start with basic models and progressively add more controls to examine the robustness of the results. In Table 1, we first use indifference as a dependent variable (Models 1 to 4), and subsequently alienation (Models 5 to 8). Looking at the results of Model 1 in Table 1, we find that having a partisan identification is negatively associated with indifference. Identifying oneself with a political party – controlling for one's level of alienation – is estimated to decrease one's level of indifference, which ranges from 0 to 1, about 0.01 points. Including country (Model 2) and election (Model 3) dummies does not change the relation between partisanship and indifference. Finally, in Model 4, individual level background variables are added, but these too, do not seem to alter the relation we want to investigate.

Turning now to alienation, the results of Model 5 indicate that having a partisan identification – controlling for one's level of indifference – decreases a citizen's level of alienation almost 0.02 points (on a 0 to 1-scale). The relation between partisanship and alienation is hence about double the size of the relation with indifference (as shown in Model 1). Additionally controlling for differences in alienation between countries by the inclusion of country-dummies in Model 6 or by the inclusion of election-dummies in Model 7 hardly affects the estimated effects. Furthermore, the results of Model 8 illustrate that the results are robust to additionally controlling for the impact of socio-demographic variables and political



interest. Comparing the results of Model 4 with those of Model 8, the conclusion has to be that partisanship is much more strongly related to alienation than to indifference.

[Table 1 about here]

The main conclusion to draw from the results presented in Table 1 is that partisanship is negatively associated both with indifference as with alienation. The size of the estimated effects, however, suggests a stronger relationship with alienation. The implication of this finding is that partisanship not only hinders an ‘open’ and indifferent attitude towards the party offer, but also prevents voters from becoming alienated towards the whole choice set of political parties. Dealignment – or the absence of partisanship – therefore, can be argued to allow for more open electorates, but more detrimentally leads to higher levels of alienation from party politics as well.

Having relied on a pooled sample of the datasets of the EES since 1989, one might wonder how the changed wording of the question gauging for partisanship affects our findings. As an additional test, we therefore investigated the impact of partisanship on indifference and alienation for each of the election studies separately. The results of these analyses are included in Appendix 4 and Appendix 5 and indicate that with the exception of the 2004 election, we consistently find partisanship to significantly decrease both indifference as well as alienation. Across the election studies, we furthermore and consistently observe the impact on alienation to be stronger than what holds for indifference.

Not only did we observe the increase of alienation in Western Europe to be more pronounced than what holds for indifference, the individual-level analyses indicate that partisanship is negatively associated mainly with alienation. Our analyses, however, are all based on the assumption that the relation between partisanship and attitudes of indifference

and alienation is constant over time. The more optimistic scholarly work on the consequences of dealignment, however, takes a different view and argues that the characteristics of apartisans have changed over time (Dalton, 2013). In this literature, it is claimed that while negative stereotypes of apartisans applied decades ago, these no longer hold for new generations of apartisans. These new generations of apartisans, it is argued, are highly sophisticated and politically engaged. Consequently, our findings on the relation between partisanship and indifference and alienation might conceal important over-time variation. More specifically, it might be that for the younger generations being an apartisan is related more strongly to indifference and less strongly to alienation. If so, our conclusion that dealignment most importantly is associated with a trend towards more political alienation might not hold for the ‘new’ apartisans entering the electorate and the link between partisanship and alienation might eventually be reversed. Even though the discontinuity in the phrasing of the party identity question prevents a longitudinal analysis on the pooled data, as an additional test we have – for each of the election samples separately – examined generational differences in the impact of partisanship on indifference and alienation. The results of these additional analyses<sup>5</sup> are reported in Appendix 6 and do not show any indications of generational differences in the effect of partisanship on indifference and alienation respectively. There is no indication, therefore, that being apartisan would have different effects for more recent cohorts of voters as is claimed in this more optimistic line of the literature.

## **Discussion**

Across established democracies, electorates can no longer be characterized as ‘closed’ and voters are less and less attached to one particular political party. With feelings of ‘my party, right or wrong’ dissipating, the question rises what type of electorates have replaced

these earlier closed electorates: open electorates, or electorates that are alienated from party politics? In this article we empirically investigate the extent to which dealignment corresponds to more open – indifferent – attitudes towards parties on the one hand and an attitude of alienation from parties on the other. We find indications that dealignment implies both strengthened feelings of indifference as well as more alienation.

Importantly, however, results are clearly stronger for alienation. We demonstrate that feelings of alienation in Western Europe have increased more strongly than indifference. At an individual-level we furthermore observe partisanship to limit a sense of alienation more strongly than it hinders an attitude of indifference towards the parties at offer. The fact the findings of our longitudinal analysis at the aggregate level are in line with what the individual-level analyses of the impact of partisanship indicate, strengthens the reliability of our conclusions. Including an interaction effect with birth cohort does not support the assumption that this relation would be different among more recent birth cohorts. Our results indicate that dealignment does imply that electorates are becoming more ‘open’ to choose, as levels of indifference increase. This increased choosiness of voters, however, comes at a huge cost – a cost of growing levels of alienation from the party system.

Nevertheless, our analyses have a number of limitations as well, most notably the change in question wording of the party identity question in the data set we used – which limits a full longitudinal analyses of partisanship or its impact on the pooled data. Further research, perhaps using other data sources, should investigate whether our conclusions hold when applying a real longitudinal analytical design. This is all the more important, as our work starts from an assumption of dealignment in advanced democracies. While our descriptive analyses indeed show indications of a trend towards decreasing levels of partisanship, we also observe important between-country variation in the extent to which partisanship decreases. In this context, we also have to acknowledge that there is still quite

some scholarly debate on this question – and this debate is particularly important in the United States (Bafumi and Shapiro, 2009). It would also be relevant for future research to use other questions (e.g., thermometer, or liking of a political party) to construct the indicators for indifference and alienation.

Despite these limitations, we find clear indications that dealignment implies a more ‘open’ attitude towards the parties. Our results, however, show that dealignment also – and even more strongly – is associated with a sense of alienation from parties. A number of scholars have optimistically described dealignment as a process that can bring about a democratic ideal of voters making well-thought-out vote choices. But even though we find indications of such a growing openness in the vote choices citizens make, our results indicate that dealignment is more of a double-edged sword, as the process also – and even more importantly – is related to a general alienation from the party system. This is not a minor issue, as the fact that dealigned voters have negative attitudes towards parties implies that the process of dealignment, can be thought to endanger the legitimacy of electoral and party politics in Western Europe. To the extent that citizens no longer feel close to one specific political party, it is likely that they will also develop a more negative attitude towards the party system as a whole.

A large literature describes a process of dealignment in advanced democracies, and a number of publications are quite optimistic about the implications of weakening bonds between parties and voters. Dalton and Welzel (2014), for example, applaud the role played by new generations of assertive citizens. The results presented in this article lead to more concern about the implications of electoral dealignment. Given the importance of growing levels of alienation, the changes observed imply that a number of traditional linkage mechanisms between citizens and the political system that are being taken up mainly by political parties, will be weakened. While political parties traditionally are considered as the

main institution that is responsible for ‘making electoral democracy work’, apparently this function is weakened, which implies that other mechanisms are necessary if the representative character of electoral democracy is to be preserved.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup>. In the 2009 and 2014 EES voter surveys, respondents’ propensity to vote for each of the parties was measured on a scale from 0 to 10 instead of 1 to 10. To allow a comparison with the earlier 1-to-10-scales, the 0-to-10 scales were recoded, with 0 being recoded to 1, the values 1 and 2 both being 2 and all other values held constant.

<sup>2</sup>. Alternatively, we also perform analyses with partisan strength as a measure of dealignment (1 = no attachment, 2 = merely a sympathizer, 3 = fairly close, 4 = very close). This analysis resulted in basically the same results (see Appendix 3).

<sup>3</sup>. Theoretically, it could be expected that these effects are not the same in all of the cases that we investigate, but that they are dependent on characteristics of the election and the political system. In an additional analysis, we therefore also estimated random intercept models in which we included voter turnout, effective number of parties, and proportionality of the electoral system as characteristics of that specific election. None of these election-level variables was found to significantly affect indifference or alienation, however, and the individual-level estimates of this analysis showed no difference with the more parsimonious models reported in this article (results available from authors).

<sup>4</sup>. It is important to note that we also observe an increase in indifference and alienation when pooling the data. The general, European-wide, trend is thus one of growing levels of indifference and alienation.

<sup>5</sup>. To examine this question we analyse the impact of birth cohorts – operationalized as 5-year intervals based on respondents' year of birth and the interactive effect of birth cohorts and partisanship.

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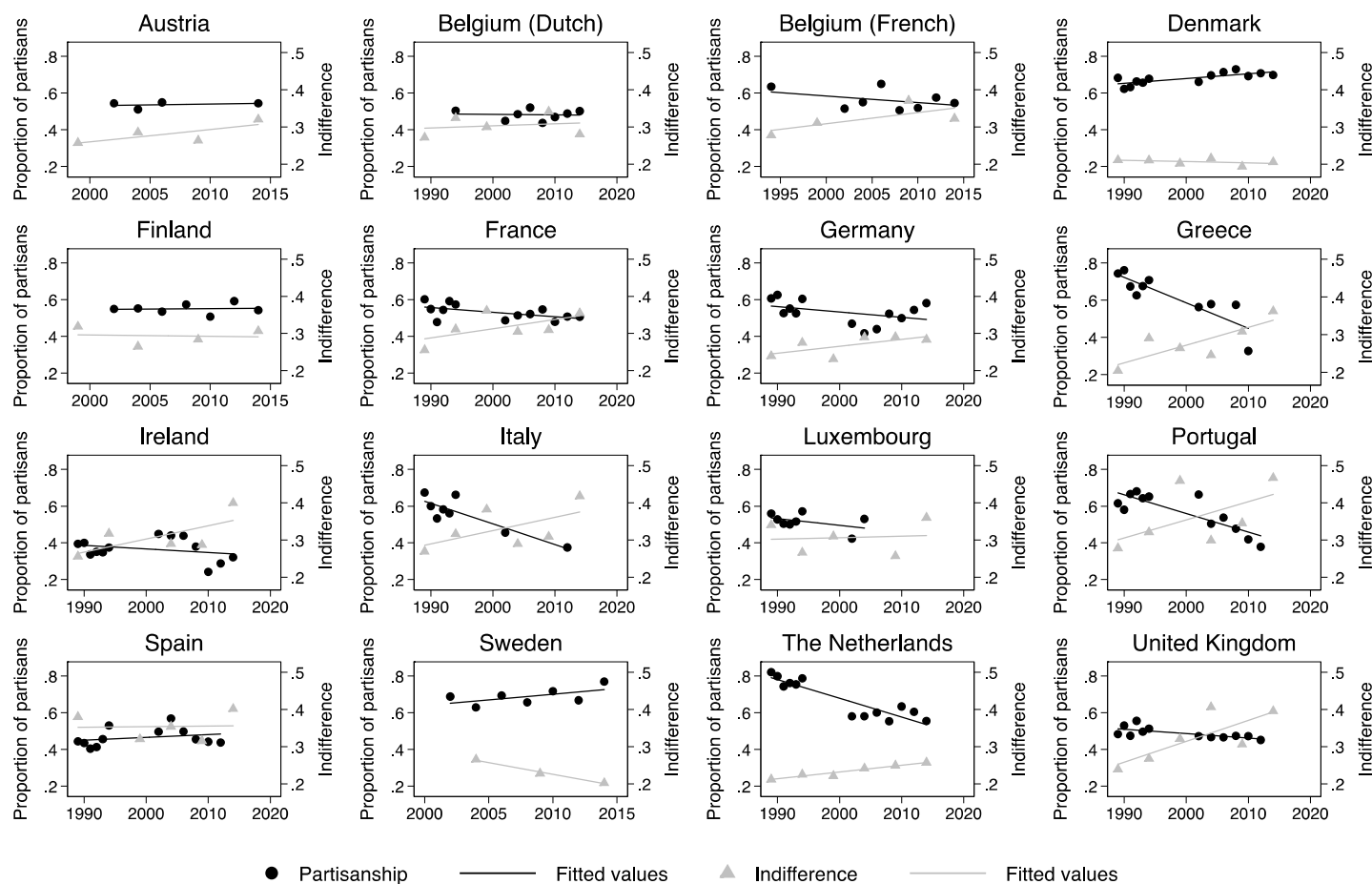
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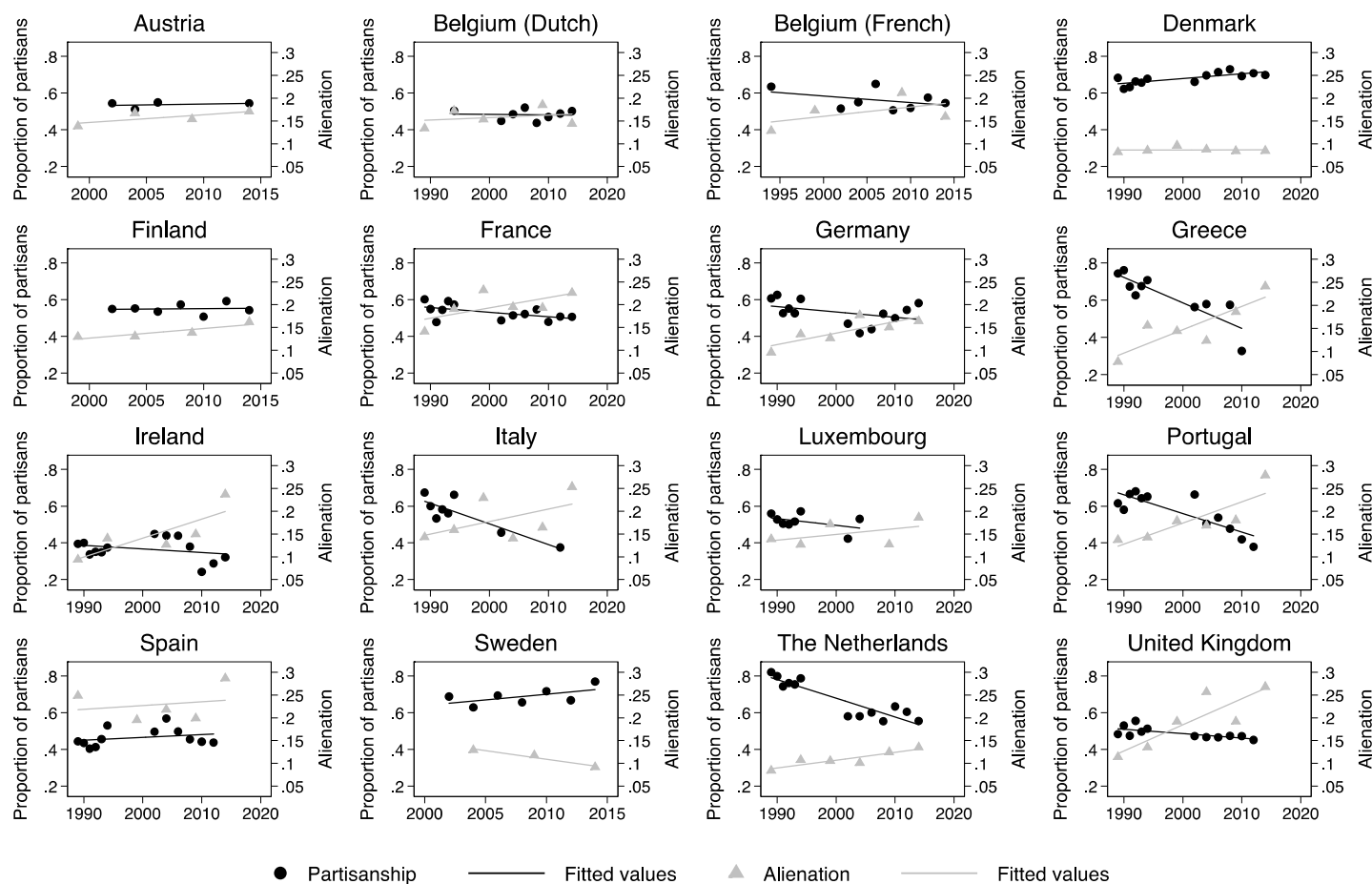
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**Figure 1.** Aggregate level trends: Partisanship and indifference in Western Europe (1989-2014)



*Note:* Trends in partisanship (left axis) and indifference (right axis) over time. Sources: Eurobarometer trend file (1970-1994), ESS 2002-2014, EES combined datafile (1989-2004), EES 2009 and EES 2014. For full information on levels of indifference in each election sample, see Appendix 1. Indifference =  $(10 - (\max(\text{PTV}_i) - \min(\text{PTV}_{j \neq i}))) / 10$ .

**Figure 2.** Aggregate level trends: Partisanship and alienation in Western Europe (1989-2014)



*Note:* Trends in partisanship (left axis) and alienation (right axis) over time. Sources: Eurobarometer trend file (1970-1994), ESS 2002-2014, EES combined datafile (1989-2004), EES 2009 and EES 2014. For full information on levels of alienation in each election sample, see Appendix 2. Alienation =  $(10 - \max(PV_i))/10$ .

**Table 1.** Explaining indifference and alienation

	Explaining Indifference				Explaining Alienation			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B
	(s.e.)	(s.e.)	(s.e.)	(s.e.)	(s.e.)	(s.e.)	(s.e.)	(s.e.)
Partisanship	-0.009 <sup>*</sup>	-0.011 <sup>***</sup>	-0.012 <sup>***</sup>	-0.008 <sup>***</sup>	-0.018 <sup>***</sup>	-0.017 <sup>***</sup>	-0.024 <sup>***</sup>	-0.023 <sup>***</sup>
	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Alienation	1.017 <sup>***</sup>	1.016 <sup>***</sup>	1.015 <sup>***</sup>	1.016 <sup>***</sup>				
	(0.007)	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.005)				
Indifference					0.768 <sup>***</sup>	0.767 <sup>***</sup>	0.761 <sup>***</sup>	0.762 <sup>***</sup>
					(0.026)	(0.025)	(0.016)	(0.018)
Female				0.003 <sup>*</sup>				-0.007 <sup>***</sup>
				(0.001)				(0.001)
Age				-0.000 <sup>***</sup>				0.000
				(0.000)				(0.000)
Religious attendance				0.008 <sup>**</sup>				-0.007 <sup>***</sup>
				(0.002)				(0.002)
Social class				-0.011 <sup>**</sup>				0.006 <sup>*</sup>
				(0.003)				(0.003)
Political interest				-0.007 <sup>***</sup>				-0.001
				(0.001)				(0.001)
Country FE	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Election FE	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Constant	0.138 <sup>***</sup>	0.150 <sup>***</sup>	0.154 <sup>***</sup>	0.189 <sup>***</sup>	-0.059 <sup>***</sup>	-0.072 <sup>***</sup>	-0.085 <sup>***</sup>	-0.088 <sup>***</sup>
	(0.005)	(0.002)	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.006)	(0.009)	(0.008)	(0.010)
<i>N</i>	75,468	75,468	75,468	62,521	75,468	75,468	75,468	62,521
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.796	0.800	0.801	0.807	0.797	0.801	0.803	0.809

*Note:* Results of regressions explaining alienation and indifference. Unstandardized coefficients and standard errors listed. Standard errors are robust for country clusters in Model 1 and Model 5 and robust for election clusters in Model 3, 4, 7 and Model 8. Significance levels: <sup>\*</sup>  $p < 0.05$ , <sup>\*\*</sup>  $p < 0.01$ , <sup>\*\*\*</sup>  $p < 0.001$ . Sources: EES combined datafile (1989-2004), EES 2009 and EES 2014.